

love is a stranger by orphan_account

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Summary:

Will knows that Mike will never be his, but that doesn't stop it from hurting.

love is a stranger

Author's Note:

This is mainly set in the kids' senior year of high school. I hope you enjoy! :)

All Will can smell is Mike — the awful cologne he's taken to wearing lately, the apple scented shampoo he uses, and the warm scent that's just Mike, *only* Mike. He brings the blanket up to his face again, the soft fabric tickling his cheeks. It's the blanket he always uses when he spends the night, only Mike must have used it sometime recently, because it's never smelled like this before.

A bang in the hallway makes Will jump, shame slipping through his veins like ice when he realizes what he was doing, smelling Mike's blanket like some kind of *pervert* .

"Hey," Mike says, appearing in the doorway holding a few pillows. "Sorry that took so long, Mom woke up and got mad that we're up so late."

They hadn't meant to stay up until two in the morning on a school night, but they had all these rented movies that are due back tomorrow, so they couldn't just waste them.

"It's okay," Will says, breathing out and reaching for the pillows. He kneels on the floor and sets the pillows down, laying the blanket out and wishing that it didn't smell like Mike. He crawls between the sleeping bag and the blanket, rolling on his side so he's facing Mike's bed. "Um. Well. Night, Mike."

"Night, Will," Mike says cheerily, flipping off his lamp.

Will flinches when the room goes black, and then relaxes. He can hear Mike breathing, and it's a steady, calming noise. He tugs the blanket up to his chin and closes his eyes.

Sometimes when it's just Mike and Will, Mike offers for him to come sleep on the bed. Never just *because* , only if they've been watching

scary movies that hit a little too close to home, or because one of them has had a bad day. Today isn't one of those days, it seems, when Mike simply gets into bed and goes quiet. Will can only just make out his shape in the darkness, but he knows exactly how he's lying—on his stomach, hugging the pillow beneath him, his face buried in it. They've had *many* conversations about it ("how can you *breathe* ?") but Will still doesn't understand it. It's endearing, though.

Will hugs his own pillow, curled around it on his side. He doesn't admit it to himself, but he's pretending it's Mike.

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It was December 1st, 1985 when Will fell in love with Mike Wheeler.

Downtown Hawkins—really, just a single stretch of businesses, but the busiest street in town—had just strung up all the Christmas lights and wreaths and bows. Snow was coming down like a scene in a movie, the perfect, fluffy kind that dusts everything in an angelic white hue. As the sun started to set, the gray of the sky transformed into a brilliant pink, tinged purple at the edges.

Snow was sticking to Mike's eyelashes, and he was laughing—at something Will said, or maybe they were still laughing at the movie they had just seen.

Will remembers thinking, *this is it, this is how it feels to be in love* .

And then Mike had turned to him and asked, "Do you think El would like that movie?"

Suddenly, the cheery decorations and the perfect, perfect snow, and the bright, happy smile on Mike's face felt out of place. *Will* felt out of place.

I'm in love with you , he thought.

"Yeah, I think she'd love it," he said instead.

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The first time Will gets drunk, *Love is a Stranger* by Eurythmics is

playing, and Will feels like he's having a revelation. Love is savage and cruel and shines like destruction. Love distorts and deranges and wrenches you up. Will certainly does feel like a zombie, these days.

There, surrounded by his closest friends (and Jonathan, who's home for the holidays and provided them the alcohol as long as they promised not to leave his sight), Will says, very drunkenly, "I'm—In love."

Lucas is the first one to speak. He doesn't believe Will. "Yeah, with who?"

"S a secret," Will slurs, shaking his head. Mike is giving him a weird look. Actually, they're all giving him a weird look. "What?"

"You haven't dated anyone since— *ever* ," Dustin says. "You've never dated anyone. How have I not noticed you haven't dated anyone?"

"Maybe he didn't want to," Max cuts in. "Maybe he's *smart* ."

She and Lucas must be fighting again, then.

Mike clinks his beer on the hardwood floor to gain their attention. "Will, you're not in love with anyone—I would know first."

Will is wondering how no one else is slurring their words like he is, when El says, "Mike."

She isn't drinking. She'd tried one sip of Mike's beer and pulled a face, shaking her head.

"Yeah?" Mike asks.

"Mike," she says again, her eyes widening meaningfully. "It's Mike."

"No," Will protests, knowing even in his drunken state that this is *bad* . "No, not—Mike. Not Mike."

"Then who?" El asks, clearly not pleased with being told she's wrong.

"Not Mike," Will says again.

Mike is looking at him now, confused. “You never told me you even *liked* anyone. Now you love her?”

Will wants to take back everything he said, because all his friends are staring at him and he knows that if he tells the truth, nothing will ever be the same again.

Lucas seems to realize the predicament he’s gotten himself into, even if he doesn’t understand the full extent. “Well, I’m in love too.”

Max rolls her eyes. “I know.”

“Who said I’m in love with *you* ?” Lucas says, but Max kisses him anyway.

The group erupts into complaints and booing, and Will sinks back onto his hands, letting out a sigh of relief now that the heat is off him. But Mike—Mike is still looking at him.

Will doesn’t want to know what it means.

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When Will wakes up, his first thought is *oh god, please don’t let Mike know* . He remembers everything that happened last night, every word he said. He wants to bury himself in his sleeping bag and never, ever come out. Figuratively and literally.

“What did El mean last night?”

Will doesn’t move, *can’t* move—he’s frozen.

“When she said ‘ *It’s Mike* ’ , what did she...”

Will can hear it in his voice. Mike knows. He’s asking because he’s hoping Will will contradict it, say he was wasted and couldn’t control what he was saying, that none of it was true. And Will wants to say these things, too, but his mouth isn’t cooperating. All that comes out is a quiet, “Mike.”

“Will, how can you—That isn’t fair. That isn’t *fair* . How long?”

Will feels tears pricking behind his eyes, but he squeezes them shut. He waits until he can trust his voice not to waver before he says, "Since the day we went to see the movie Santa Claus," Will chokes, keeping his eyes trained on the floor. "I'm sorry."

Mike stands up and starts pacing. Will doesn't want to see what his face looks like. "That was years ago. *Years* ," he must do the math, because then he's crying out, "Four years!"

"I know, I'm sorry," Will says, his voice nothing more than a whisper. "I never—I want you to know that I never did anything weird, or creepy. I never—" he stops short, thinking of the times he's drawn Mike and shredded the evidence, the shirts he's borrowed because he 'forgot' his own, the times he's stared at Mike when he thought he could get away with it. Has he been a creep this whole time? He backtracks, shaking his head. "I know you don't love me back. You don't have to tell me."

Mike stays silent, and just when Will is wondering if maybe he left the room, he sees Mike sitting criss-cross on the floor in front of him. Will buries his tear-stained cheeks back into his pillow, hating that Mike is seeing him like this. It's humiliating—It's everything Will never wanted to happen. Mike should have never found out.

"Will, I'm sorry," Mike says softly. Will clenches his teeth and looks up, wiping his eyes. "I'm sorry, but I'm not—"

"*I know* ," Will says, shaking his head. "I said you don't have to do this."

Mike's eyes are far too kind, far too *sympathetic* . "Okay. I'm sorry. I'm—I'm just really sorry."

Will takes one last glance at Mike and then says, "I think you guys should go now."

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Will expects for everything to change. And it does, in a way. Mike never stops shooting him these concerned glances, and he doesn't touch El in front of him anymore, not even a hug, and he's always,

always trying to set Will up on dates with guys who may or may not even be gay.

But almost everything else slots back into place, as if Will never confessed his deepest secret. He and Mike still have sleepovers, by themselves and with the others. They still go see movies together, and share clothes sometimes, and hardly go a day without seeing each other. They're still going to attend the same college in the fall, still signed up to be roommates.

Will almost wishes that nothing stayed the same. He wants Mike to be angry—wants him to be disgusted and feel betrayed and never want to see Will again. At least then he wouldn't have to deal with the crippling realization that Mike will never love him the way Will does. He knew this before, of course he did, but having the proof right in front of his face has been more than he can bear as of late. There hasn't been a single day that has passed without Will praying—to some kind of higher power, but not to God; he's been through enough to know that there isn't one out there—that he'll wake up and find that he isn't in love with Mike Wheeler.

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"Do you still, um."

Will looks up from the book he's reading, locking eyes with a nervous Mike. He's perched on the loft bed they built together, his legs dangling off the side. He's fidgeting with his hands. "Like, do you still, you know."

Will bites the inside of his cheek. He could tell the truth.

"No," Will says instead. He forces a nonchalant expression. "No, that was—Not anymore."

Mike lets out an audible breath. "Okay," he says. "That's good. You deserve someone who can love you back, Will."

"Yeah," Will says quietly, turning back to his book so Mike won't see the guilt written all over his face. "Thanks, Mike."

Someday, Will will find someone who can love him back. Someday,

he'll see Mike and his heart won't hurt. Someday, he'll look back on the years he spent being in love with Mike Wheeler and he'll think, *I'm glad that's over* .

For now, though, he prays.

Author's Note:

Thank you for reading!